

S E R M O N

Preached at the Visitation
holden by the Lord Bishop of Lincoln.

by **M. R. W A T K I N S ' S**

in the Cathedral Church of Lincoln.

V I S I T A T I O N - S E R M O N

Preached in *Lincoln Cathedral*,

ROGER WATKINS August 24th, 1778,

Rector of *Walsingham*,

And late Fellow of *Exeter College* in *Oxford*.

Published at the request of the Clergy.

Printed and Sold by *W. P. COO.*

MR. CROWDER, in *Four-Market-Street*, *London*. Also *Mr. G. G. G.*
and *Mr. G. G. G.* in *Cambridge*. *Mr. T. G. G.* in *Oxford*.
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15 June 2

MR. WATKINS'S

MISSION - SERMON

Preached in the
Cathedral



August 24th 1778.

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S E R M O N

Preached at the VISITATION

holden for the Lord Bishop of *Lincoln*,

by the Archdeacons of *Lincoln* and *Leicester*
in the Cathedral Church of *Lincoln*,

August 24th, 1778.

B Y
ROGER WATKINS, M.A.

Rector of FILLINGHAM,

And late Fellow of *Balliol College* in *Oxford*.

Published at the request of the Clergy.

L I N C O L N;

PRINTED and SOLD by *W. WOOD*.

Mr. CROWDER, in Pater-noster-row, LONDON. Mess. MERRILLS
and FLETCHER at CAMBRIDGE. Mr. FLETCHER, at OXFORD.
Mr. SMART at WORCESTER, Mr. TURNER at LUDLOW.

SEERMON

Preached at the Visitation

held for the Lord Bishop of Lincoln

by the Archdeacons of Lincoln and Leicester

in the Cathedral Church of Lincoln

E R R A T A

Page 17th, line 11th, for *we therefore become*, read, *we are therefore become*.

P. 17th, l. 13th. for *pitiful*, read *pitiabla*.

P. 18th, l. 8th. for *illusion*, read *allusion*.

P. 18th, l. 20th. for *thou*, read *it*.

P. 20th, l. 6th. for *steer*, read *sleep*.

P. 22nd, l. 26th. for *exalteth*, read *exalteth*.

P. 22nd, l. 27th. for *bringeth*, read *bringing*.

Reverend of FILLINGHAM

And late Fellow of Balliol College in Oxford



Published at the request of the Clergy.

L I N C O L N

Printed and sold by W. WOOD.

Mr. CROWDER, in Paternoster-row, London. Messrs. MARRIAGE
and FLETCHER at Cambridge. Mr. FLETCHER at Oxford.
Mr. SMART at Worcester. Mr. TURNER at London.

I. KINGS, CHAP. 3d, Verse 9th.

Give thy servant an understanding heart.

UPON a general view of human imperfection, nothing affords us a more comfortable relief, than the consciousness that we are immediately under the protection of a *faithful creator*; from the assistance of whose infinite powers *out of weakness we are made strong*.

On this confidence was founded the petition in the text; the original reason for which, and the particular purpose to which it was to be applied, are too familiar to admit of explanation. A common interest in it arises from an assurance that its object has been so remarkably approved of, and rewarded, by that unerring wisdom from whence *every good and perfect gift cometh*, as must ever recommend it, by distinguished merit, to the human wish.

Was this prayer to be followed, abstractedly, through all its implications, it would, undoubtedly, unfold itself into variety of instruction.

It insinuates an humiliating, and perhaps a mortifying, opinion of our own frailty; it vindicates a gracious design presiding over the dispensations of providence; it leads us to the best and most rational dependence; it may also suggest to us the expediency of examining into the propriety, or tendency of our several affections; each of these is a subject, which has a direct influence upon moral improvement.

It is, moreover, of so large, and, indeed, of so universal an extent, as equally to adapt itself to all the conditions, amusements, or business of the world. — But the present occasion will be my apology for confining its application merely to intellectual and religious considerations. *The man of God will perceive his peculiar reliance upon it, as a minister of Christ; and a steward of the mysteries of God.*

There cannot be a more awful call for the blessing of an understanding heart, than when it is implored in aid of the most solemn and important
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of all trusts : It can never answer it's own office in a more amiable or beneficial effect, than when gently leading our cautious and timid steps through the wonders of *the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge* : or when supporting us in the *day of rebuke and blasphemy* ; wherein real difficulties in faith, or the mere exercise of argumentative skill, are continually sent to reproach the living God.

It hath pleased the great disposer of *times and seasons*, that *the lot is fallen unto us* to live in an age which may challenge the heightened description of a prophet ; in taking counsel that it may add *sin to sin*.

Infidelity was never less scrupulous in its declarations, nor more determined in its measures, than at present. — So restless, that it is constantly teasing itself in the toils of objection ; so industrious, as to pick up the spent and pointless arrows from a vanquished field.

Unrepressed by evidence, unabated by candor, unsatisfied with fact, it stoops to the most abject compliances ; or is noisy with the boldest clamors that will join it's cause. So impetuous in its fury,

so earnest in it's slaughter, that it is *ready for the battle* with every weapon, except *the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God*. Religion is it's devoted enemy, and therefore must have no mercy. It pursues her into the still and peaceful retreats of her calmest meditations; it haunts and disturbs her in her rites and ceremonies, the outward expressions of a sincere conviction. It murmurs at her restraints; it quarrels with her precepts; it denies her authority; it abuses her mysteries.

A suspicion might naturally be formed that there must be something either extremely fallacious, or absolutely mischievous, in the christian institution to deserve this treatment: or that the opposers of it had, by the eagerness of their conduct, a substitution of irresistible benefit to propose in exchange for it. Let us attend them a little in these pretensions. Do they engage, in a better manner, to instruct or to perfect human nature? Inspire it with qualities which may contribute more to its dignity, or to it's usefulness? Can they put self-government upon a more refined or improving plan; enter more deeply into the inward recesses, and first conceptions of the soul; guard her in her thought; watch her infant design; regulate the springs and movements of the heart; lay before it
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the dangers of it's own treachery; or introduce it with more tender feelings, more extensive benevolence, into the wants and miseries of society? Can they, after all, invite us by more animating encouragement to our duty; quicken us with more exalted hopes; restrain us with more chilling fears; or rest our behaviour on more alarming sanctions? Consult natural religion upon each of these points, and you will soon see how she hath *erred in vision, and stumbled in judgment*. — Appeal to her for *the recompence of reward*, and you will find her unprovided with an answer. She has little more than doubts, conjecture, and uncertainty to offer you. Attend her through the sweet and enchanting scenes of PLATO; or the diligent and philosophic searches of TULLY; she has wishes, she has dread; she has pleas, she has blushes upon this article; but *still clouds and darkness are round about her*.

Under such hesitation and perplexity, virtue is distressed; cramped in her noblest object; and loses the appearance of that *star*, which, in *the patient continuance of well-doing*, made her to *rejoice with exceeding great joy*.

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Now the gospel of Christ professes to comprehend, and, indeed, distinctly enlarges upon these several considerations; *stablishes, strengthens, settles* them. It provides for human happiness, in every personal and connected regard. It, moreover, discovers fresh and eternal sources of it in that future inheritance, which, under a state of unassisted reason, *many righteous men have desired to see, and have not seen it.* It cannot then but seem strange, that the extraordinary information by it's doctrines, and the acknowledged purity of it's laws should meet with nothing, in return, but indifference or bitterness.

Impartial judgment must ever own the obligation upon every moral agent *with his mind*, at least, to *serve the law of God*; though *with his flesh the law of sin*. A conduct this, founded in nature, and usually confirmed by fact. The most rude and barbarous ages of mankind have ever embraced with thankfulness the benevolence of philosophy which has attempted to purify their morals, and promote their united advantages.—Not so the fate of that which came *to fulfil all righteousness!*

But, perhaps, it will be alledged, that this is not putting the christian revelation upon it's real, at least, upon it's modern footing of exception. You, however defective in your own obedience, are
ready

ready to pronounce, that *the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just and good.* Neither would you much complain of it's severities and restrictions upon your conduct though it be *kept bound with chains and in fetters*; provided other grievances were removed. But the understanding is enslaved; the free powers of the human mind are over-ruled; their assent demanded to things above their conception, and seemingly repugnant to their clearest and best discernment. Herein you suppose may be sufficient justification why many of Christ's disciples go *back, and walk no more with him.*

This, though a popular objection; it must be remarked, equally wounds natural with revealed religion. Each has it's *hidden wisdom*, and there are things *hard to be understood* in both. Should it, however, appear that obscurities affecting the most material and essential tenets of the former *are brought to light* by the latter, here is a reason why the christian dispensation may *find some favor in your sight*: or, if the eternal obligations of morality upon man are thence *established upon better promises*, we trust you will *forgive it this wrong.*

The remonstrance, notwithstanding, may be admitted with every circumstance of strength and advantage.

advantage which it's warmest patron would wish to give it. For the divine writers themselves openly acknowledge that they *speake the wisdom of God in a mystery*. But they never thought this to be a proper ground why they ought to suppress their message; or, why mankind should be at liberty that they *might not hear or receive instruction*.

The gospel submits to our belief, a system of mercy, which now is, and must ever remain, till the day of judgment, of unfathomable astonishment to us all. But it produces attestation framed upon the most plain and intelligible of all principles, matters of fact, as the foundation of that belief. Compare it's evidence with it's other wonders, and you will see that conviction may fairly arise in one instance; and *why should it be thought a thing incredible with you that it shall arise in all?* Read it with cool attention, carefully examine it's entire harmony and correspondence, not by detached, scattered passages; but collect *the whole body fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth*; then will it be able to maintain it's own cause, though the foolish man blasphemeth it daily.

This measure, liberal and equitable as it seems, you oppose under a general imputation of suspected evidence.

evidence: For *if it bear witness of itself, it's witness is not true.* Would you then apply a legal form to screen an act of real injustice, in rejecting the only possible testimony that can be obtained? You pronounce the mysteries of the gospel to be inexplicable by reason, and, after that, do you expect that reason should explain them? You still urge it's positive claim of enquiry in matters of religion. It is invited to *search, to examine, to judge of itself.* — But what is it to *search, examine,* and form it's judgment upon? Not, certainly, things which are above the reach of it's faculties.

You then ask why, in these, the obligation upon it's assent?—Because it is under the dominion of one who is *higher than the highest.* Every endowment we possess, *cometh from above,* and, therefore, in the nature of things, supposes subjection. And if the will, the thought, and every other exertion of the soul must *learn obedience,* you will find it no easy task to shew why the understanding alone is to be excepted.

The avowed intention of a revelation is to lead us to those discoveries which, of ourselves, we are not able to make; otherwise, there is no necessity for revelation at all.—On this assertion you point out a striking defect in the gospel-scheme. In it's articles of

faith, it has not given you those clear notices, and that distinct information which you want. *The light that is in it, is darkness.* The charge, stript of it's murmur, amounts to this, that a perfect being is possessed of *a spirit of wisdom and understanding* which is *too wonderful and excellent for you; you cannot attain unto it.*

Now it is so far from being denied that the gospel *revealeth the deep and secret things*, that this, among others, is an argument in support of it's divine commission. For it would have been much more liable to exception, had it brought nothing with it but what naturally fell within the compass of our own knowledge.—It cannot be supposed, but that a being, composed of all excellence, must intimately understand the properties of his own nature. Whatever manifestations of it, therefore, he has graciously made to us, must be the *true image of the invisible God*; perfectly reconcileable with his immutability, and equally consistent with all his perfections. This truth is immediately founded on his moral attributes. It rests with you then to consider, whether many difficulties which occur in the New Testament are not such solely because their subjects are not imparted to us in their full extent; and whether *offences* taken against them, when *seen through a glass darkly*, may not be void of all propriety and justice, if applied to them when better explained and apprehended. No impeachment, however,

ever, can lie against infinite wisdom, that it now gives us but partial declarations of what particularly belongs to our future existence ; or, that it, by degrees, prepares the understanding (which is to *abound more and more in knowledge*) for the reception of those objects which shall meet it in the last refinements and collected energy of all it's powers.

Could you, after all, be able to accomplish the great point you aim at, the right of with-holding your assent where the nature of the object is not submitted to the gage and capacity of your comprehension ; you would give reason the most dangerous blow it has ever yet received. You then leave it nothing but a barren, negative, and hopeless office ; to tell us that every thing is impenetrably dark and unintelligible. All science shrinks and recoils at this idea ! the discouragement affecting the meanest production in the material, as well as the highest order in the spiritual class of beings. Nay, pursue it to its direct consequence, and you may be enabled to dispute the possibility of all existences ; *from the cedar-tree that is in Lebanon, even unto the byssop that springeth out of the wall.*

Further, let us enquire upon what pretensions we presume that the purposes of providence ought to

be explicitly accounted for to it's creatures? This can be neither consistent with our present condition, with our present dependence, or with that *grace* by which *we are what we are*. All God's works both of nature and revelation are full of wonders. To think of obtaining precise and adequate notions of either, is, to *think of ourselves, more highly than we ought to think*. The wish (except we could alter our nature) is unreasonable; the attempt fruitless.

Discouraging as these observations may appear, yet *the truth that is in Jesus* by no means shews the least slight or disrespect to human reason; treats it with regard and tenderness; offers an evidence (which, in this case, is it's first and proper concern) to the strictest canvas and coolest determination. Should it, in this instance, make it's report that it hath discovered a proof intelligible, distinct, and decisive; then is it far from being at your option whether you receive the dispensation founded upon it, or not. For your behaviour (*whether you bear, or whether you forbear*) cannot make void an original obligation upon you, as a rational, dependent, and moral agent.

It cannot but be observed, that the vehemence of controversy often combines two things of such entire and opposite natures in themselves as cannot be sub-

subject to the same laws of examination. It brings the whole of the christian œconomy to be tried at the bar of reason. The credentials with which it introduced it's commission, the purport and result of it's intention, are, unquestionably, matters to be *judged of man's judgment*. But is it to call in nature to the search of things that are out of nature? The original transgression threw man entirely out of that state in which he came perfect from the hands of his maker. Forfeited innocence and the loss of the divine favor produced an havock and ruin, from which he could not extricate himself by his *own power or boldness*. A shock this, at which all his faculties, and all his endeavors stood confounded! A recovery, if at all possible, must be above the contrivance or effect of either. There must be an extraordinary exertion of infinite wisdom, and as such, some thing beyond the reach of finite comprehension.

It remains still to be asked upon the complaint against perplexities, whether you have really found these in the gospel, or whether you have made them? Have you, from a curiosity once fatal to your nature, been running to *the tree of knowledge*, for which there seems to be a standing decree, that *thou shalt not eat of it*? Has God, in some measure, admitted you to *see the vision of the almighty*, and have you, upon the weak opinion of reason, been *intruding into those things which thou*

thou hast not seen? Or, what is worse, have you been rejecting *the testimony of God, that your faith should stand in the wisdom of man;* wantonly leading the *simplicity that is in Christ into the wilderness of doubtful disputations, to be tempted of cunningly devised fables?* If you have invented embarrassment by abstracted reasoning, and chased certain truths into the airy regions of metaphysical subtilty, till you have lost sight of them, and clouded even common sense; *see thou to that.* The gospel, under such circumstances, is neither answerable for your difficulties, nor for your philosophy. But look into the world, and you may perceive a disheartening fate often attending adventurers, who, in religious enquiries, affect to *be wise above what is written.* They set out with accounting for the divine mind and it's dispensations to it's creatures, certainly upon imperfect notions, perhaps upon false conceptions of both. The principles they assume are of their own creation; and their deductions (we may appeal to daily mortality) *a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.*

The gospel hath disclosed to you the nature of the Deity, as far as it was necessary for it's own purposes, and it's own duties. And herein every thing is upon a clear, consistent, rational plan. Upon a subject which *no eye hath seen, neither could it enter into the heart of man to conceive;* it could not fail but it must *shew*
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you mysteries, which it has neither proceeded to explain, nor given you encouragement to think, by your own *searchings*, you shall *find out*: and for this plain reason, because *you cannot bear them now*. But these are so intimately blended and interwoven with it's moral precepts, and upon the evidence of revelation, so incontestably bear the *image and superscription* of the same authority; that the whole must stand or fall together.

It can be no pleasing employment to contrast the frailties of reason with her powers; nor is it to be thought *that we therefore become her enemy, because we tell her the truth*. She daily discovers degrees of inability; is often seen in the meanest and most pitiful state of infirmity.—On the other hand, when she hath been regularly brought up *under tutors and governors*, if her ideas are clear and distinct, their agreements or repugnancies evident and certain; she is, no doubt, well qualified to *judge righteous judgment*. But she ought to be acquainted with her province and her strength; for *she has bounds which she shall not pass*: And therefore, in the meridian of her pride, may bear to be told, she is human. Some cautions of this kind she will, probably receive, with a more favorable audience, if she considers the *hard and distracting bondage wherein she is made to serve* her present masters.

One set applies to her to *perform all their pleasure*; to deliver them out of those labyrinths and inconsistencies into which a forwardness of disposition, or the folly of signalizing a name, may have deeply entangled them. These teach her to treat the scriptures as having no authority, scarcely any meaning of their own. The clearest passages must comply with distorted applications; be thrown into illusion and allegory, or any thing but their true sense; must be *arrayed in a gorgeous robe* of critical ostentation, to illustrate some new conceit, some tinselled brilliancy of wit and learning in a parading writer; otherwise, be declared, loudly and without reserve, absurdity and nonsense. And all those pious pains are taken out of pure compassion to the gospel; to save it from those reproaches which the obvious and natural import of the expression may draw from *the seat of the scorner*; and to *cut off occasion, from those who seek occasion, to glory in the things which concern their infirmities*. But *the tender mercies of some men are cruel*. For if *the interpretation of scripture* becomes the subject only of literary exercise, the wanton sport of every whimsical and heated imagination; it has no longer any features of *the power of God, or the wisdom of God*.

Another party takes a different line. The feeble mind hath, perhaps, just strength sufficient (and a little serves) to conceive a doubt; no effort of its own

own is able to relieve it from it's perplexity, and there is neither modesty nor frankness in it's nature to confess it's poverty, or to seek assistance. It betakes it's self therefore to the usual and last retreat of ignorance and obstinacy; a silly confidence, or a fixed aversion. An original infirmity now shoots up into the fond notion of superior penetration. It hath, seemingly, distinguished imperfection where the generality of mankind thought themselves in possession of an established truth. Upon this persuasion, enamoured of it's self-importance, it mistakes it's own imaginations for real objections against the evidence and obligation of religion itself.— Then hath Infidelity *established it's kingdom*. Then adieu to every manly and laudable exertion of the understanding! Adieu to those pleasing and animating hopes, which an apostle, under the firmest image of dependence and security, describes as *the anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast*. The covenanted and certain terms of man's eternal happiness now vanish into the flimsy theory of moral beauty; fitness, relations, and truth of things. Piety transplanted into this soil, sickens at the change. Here it *batb no deepness of earth*, no longer refreshed with *the dew of heaven*. It shall therefore *be as an oak whose leaf fadeth: and as a garden that bath no water*.

These mischiefs from an active resistance, or lazy contempt may shew the unbeliever the malignity or

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weakness

weakness of his cause. It is his duty to attend to, and to correct both. He may set an high value upon the force and sagacity of his own reason; but as this is united to a moral nature, the culture of virtue, the discipline of affections, and an entire regard to the whole interests of man, ought to steer and regulate it's pursuits. Partiality leaves a defect in the human character; and it must be from the associated vigor and concurrence of all our capacities, moral and intellectual, that we gain the possession of *an understanding heart*. Which, on the part of *the enemy of the cross of Christ*, can never suffer him to imagine, that, upon superficial, or no examination, he is at liberty to despise what deserves the most serious enquiry; and what professes to be of everlasting consequence. It will not allow him hastily to suppose that a religion which rests it's whole authority upon evidence, and solicits an assent only upon proof; can conceal an insidious or false promise.—If he starts at enthusiasm, this is certainly a snare which every prudent man wishes to avoid. But whilst he shuns an impulse which acts with the stubbornness of that *deaf and dumb spirit*, which often *casts men into the fire and into the water*; he should know how to distinguish between intemperate heat, and firm conviction.—A dispassionate mind will weigh impartially the defence with the *railing accusation*. It will see that system is as much applicable to one opinion as to another: For the mere name is innocent
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and harmless. Something, however, is due to revelation from the purport of it's message. It claims a divine original; it inculcates what is acknowledged by all to be of real use and instruction to mankind. It, at least, therefore deserves the attention of thought, whilst it *speaks forth the words of truth and soberness*. It brings with it a quality which may also assist us in our clearest intuitions, for it softens prejudice; which in itself, has no real merit: the least so, when actuated by wrong impressions, and maintained by perversity of cavil.—Nor can reason derive any honor from it's labours in contending against appearances of sublime wisdom and consummate goodness.

Again, if upon a view of the neglected or persecuted state of religion, he who is appointed it's immediate guardian, and to whom *are committed the oracles of God*; would know how to *make full proof of his ministry*: His duty, in the ordinaty course of things, like that of his adversary, may be drawn from the same source; *an understanding heart*. For he who first obtained the grant of it, and proved it's value by a long experience; positively asserts it's virtue in this respect. *Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee, to deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things.*—The minister of Christ inherits a commission of discouraging aspect from it's institution; that, *in the world he should have tribulation*.

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And uncommon would be his share of it, was he obliged to follow, minutely, it's follies and contradictions through all their weakneses and all their depravities. An extension of *good will towards men* will ever be the favorite wish, and laboured endeavour of *brotherly kindness*. It is more peculiarly his province whose character appoints him to be *the light of the world*; and whose office directs him to *turn many unto righteousness*. But neither the one nor the other consists in *doating about questions and strife of words*. The relaxed state of christianity, under the various polemical writings which are *given us day by day*, is, at least, a presumptive argument that the true spirit of it depends upon something very different from *the rudiments of the world*, which never reach the immediate seat of religion. *An understanding heart* requires more, materially more, than the solution of doubts, or the removal of scruples. Obstructions more dangerous, and less tractable, must be withdrawn; indispositions of the mind restored; it's licentiousness restrained; it's vanity subdued; it's moral impurities reformed; and the whole frame of the soul reduced to that temperament and composure which may fit it for the reception of those mild graces and humble affections; the characteristic excellence of a religion, *casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God; and bringeth into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*.